The Aventine Mithræum Adjoining the Church of St. Prisca

A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE DUTCH EXCAVATIONS ON THE AVENTINE

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The story starts on the 19th of July 64 A.D. Late that night a great fire broke out in the little shops around the Circus Maximus — after raging for nine days, it had reduced large sections of Rome to smouldering ruins. The XIIIth district, the Aventine, was not spared, and the worst damage was done, of course, in the part adjoining the Circus where St.Prisca now stands (fig. 1). The fire crept up the slope against the wind and wrecked everything within reach.

It must follow that any house supposedly inhabited by Aquila and his wife Prisca, known to us from the New Testament, if situated in this district, must have been utterly destroyed, and in fact, our present investigations have not as yet brought to light anything dating farther back than the year 64. There is, moreover, nothing to prove that Aquila and Prisca actually lived on this spot: the Bible text merely tells us that they lived in Rome at a given period — and whatever their financial position may have been — whether they were poor according to the general assumption, or wealthy, as has been maintained by others — it is most unlikely that they should have lived, as eastern immigrants, in such a smart neighbourhood. In any case, they were of such small account, that they were expelled from Rome, together with the rest of the Hebrews, in 50 A.D., by a decree of Emperor Claudius. Whether they ever returned is a question bound up with a difficult problem of interpretation of the New Testament. In any case, if St.Peter ever came to Rome (a controversial question) they must have known him, since his arrival in Rome is dated somewhere around 42 A.D. So it is quite possible he may have celebrated baptisms in their house, whether large or small — even though it may not actually have stood on the spot where St.Prisca now stands, as a mediaeval inscription in the church would have us believe.

It goes without saying that the extent of the fire under Nero made it impossible to rebuild everything at short notice. The scanty development of technique makes a long-term reconstruction in a number of cases more than probable: we need only think of the damage done during the last war, a considerable part of which has not yet been repaired, after ten years, in spite of our present-day resources. Neither should we forget the difficulties in the financing of the reconstruction. It may be objected that Nero managed to have large parts of his new villa inside Rome, the so-called Golden Palace, completed in a very short time (about 3½ years). [1]) We can answer that by saying that it was precisely Nero's imperial egotism — and much has

[1]) C. C. VAN ESSEN: *La topographie de la Domus Aurea,* in *Med. Kon. Nederl. Akad. Wetensch. (Afd. Letterk.)* XVII No 12, 1954, in which also some literature on the fire of July 64 A.D.

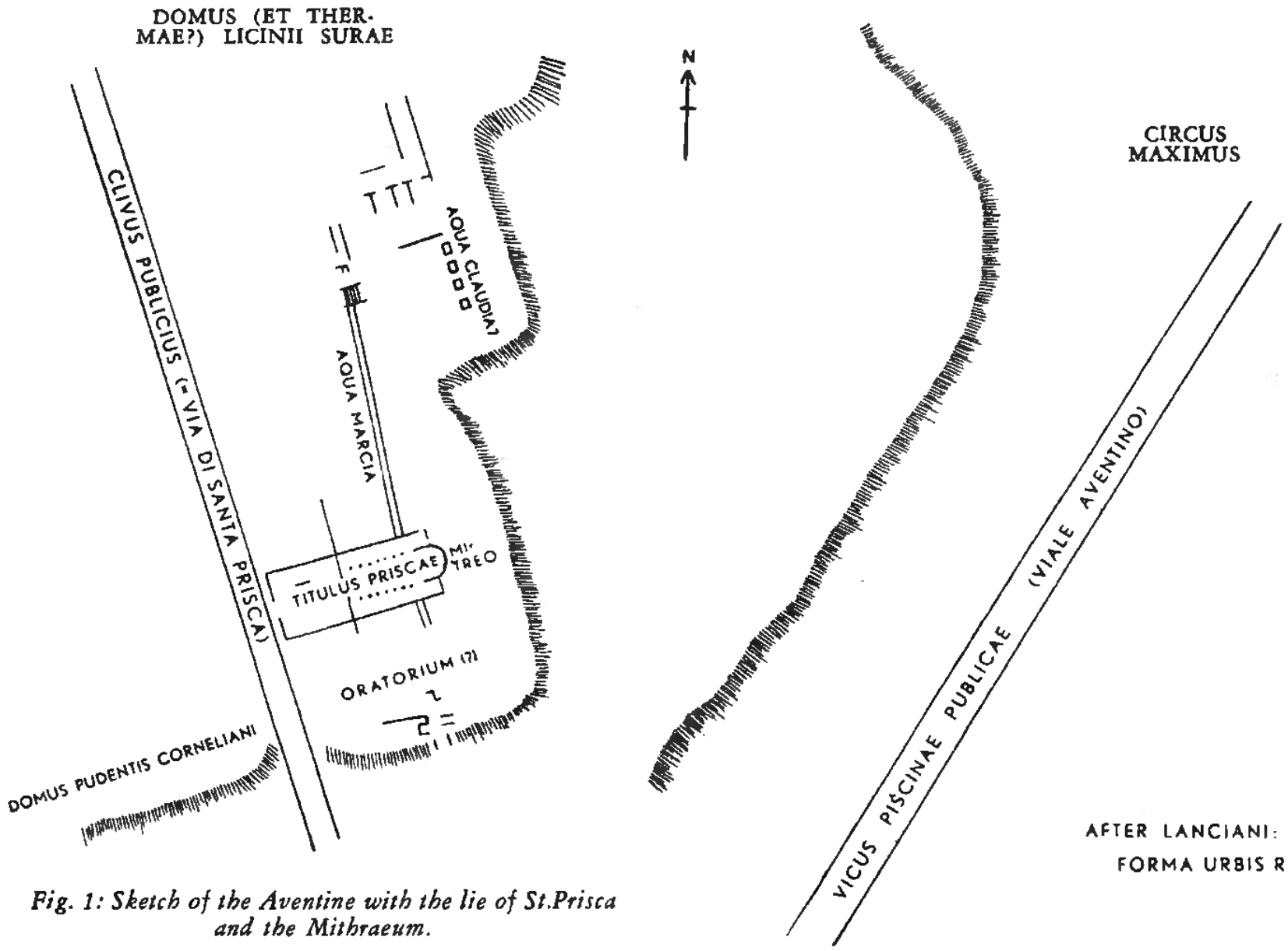
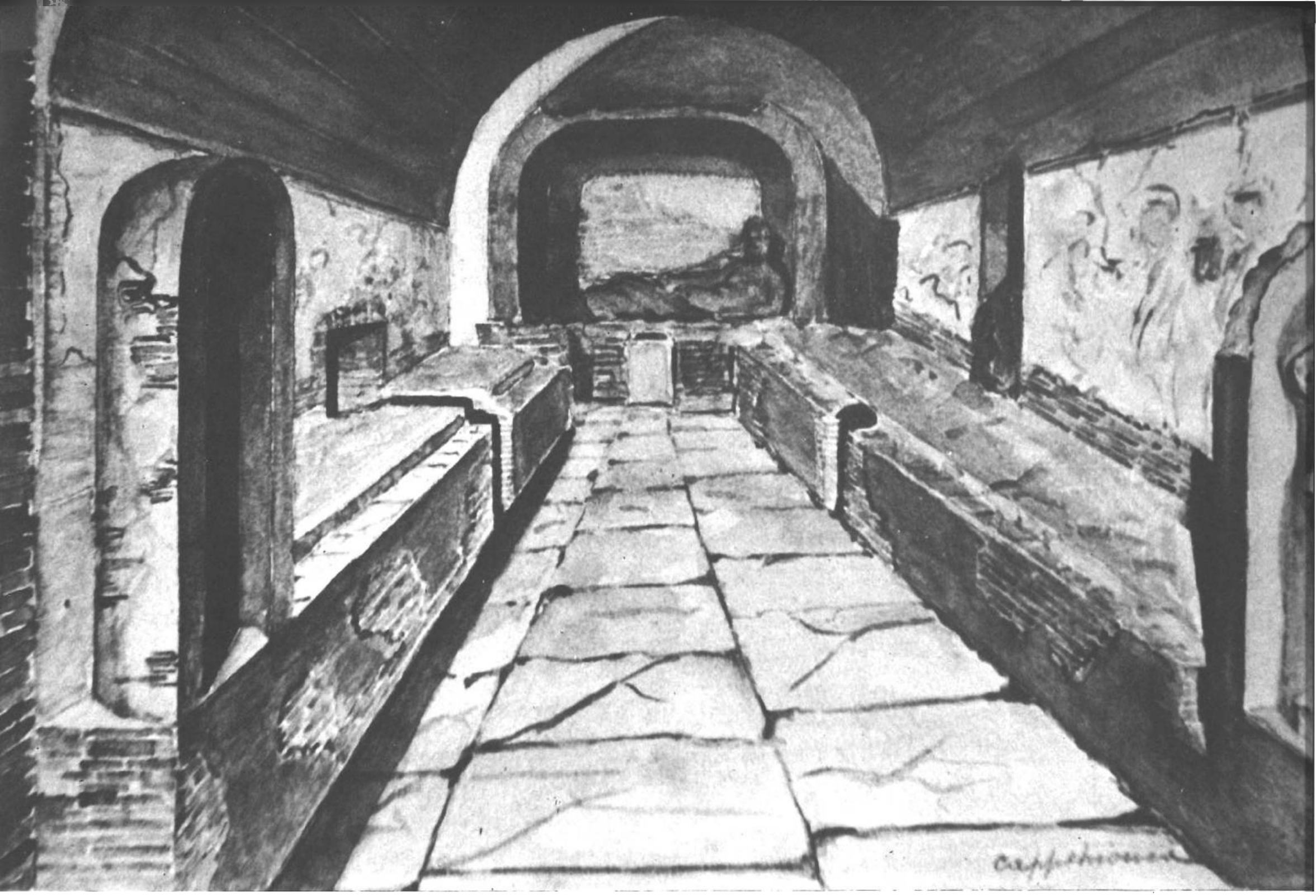


Fig. 1: Sketch of the Aventine with the lie of St.Prisca and the Mithraeum.

been written on the part he played on this occasion — which constituted the greatest obstacle in the way of general reconstruction, owing to his monopoly of labour and building materials. Had Nero possessed the merest scrap of social consciousness, he would have quietly gone to live, like his predecessors, in one of the two already existing palaces on the Palatine.

II

After all this, we cannot be surprised that the most ancient vestiges found near St.Prisca should not go farther back than 100 A.D. They belong to a house (we shall call it House I) whose southern part is now occupied by the church. (fig. 2) We know very little about this house, though we can make a few conjectures. We have a piece of the back wall and a number of vaulted rooms, built up against it shortly after its construction (somewhere around 150 A.D.?), probably built to support a terrace facing the garden. The length of the front of these vaulted rooms gives us an approximate idea of the length of the back wall, and thus probably also that of the front wall, which ran along the Clivus Publicius, underneath the present Via di Santa Prisca. For the rest, we can only surmise that the courtyard to the north of the church might coincide with an inner courtyard, surrounded by rooms similar to



Platè I:

Reconstruction of the Mithraeum by Ottorino Cappabianca (1954). On both sides of the central passage, reclining benches. Further to the right a niche with torchbearer. In the background the sanctuary niche, on the sidewalls, paintings.

Plate II:

Marble relief of Mithras as bull-slayer in a cave decorated with heads of the planet gods.

(Museo Civico, Bologna).

those we can still observe in houses of the same period at Ostia. The terrace faced an open space, possibly the garden of the house, as it is hard to imagine that one should have had access to these private rooms straight from the public thoroughfare. A short time later, perhaps somewhere around 125 A.D., these grounds were sold. The new owner built his house (House II) perpendicularly to the axis of House I (north-south) and right up against it. We do not know which way this House II faced, but we do know more about it than we do about the earlier one. For one thing, this house is easily recognizable by the insufficient amount of lime used in its construction, so that the bricks in its walls and vault are stuck together with some sort of sand conglomerate. This unstable construction is due either to stinginess of the part of the client, or to dishonesty on the part of the contractor (at no time an unusual happening in Rome). The exact date of the building is unknown to us, as here also the most reliable evidence, the seals on the bricks, is missing. Even in our days, the greater part of the cellar space can still be visited. It consists of a passage with four branches, enclosing a central room. This had two openings in the vault, for light and ventilation, which shows that it must have lain beneath an inner courtyard, so that the upper rooms rested on the walls of the passage. We have been able to find a few remains of the floors of these rooms. The northern venthole was later enlarged to form a pool, so that an arch had to be built to support the vault of the central room. The cellar space was originally quite undecorated, having been used, as was the custom in these days, as a storeroom. In the south-east corner there was a fountain, flanked with a niche, probably a storage place for the crockery which was washed there. This fountain alone was surrounded by a decorative frame. The new owner had also bought the vaulted rooms under House I, which were turned over to him by the former owner because he now had no further use for them. This

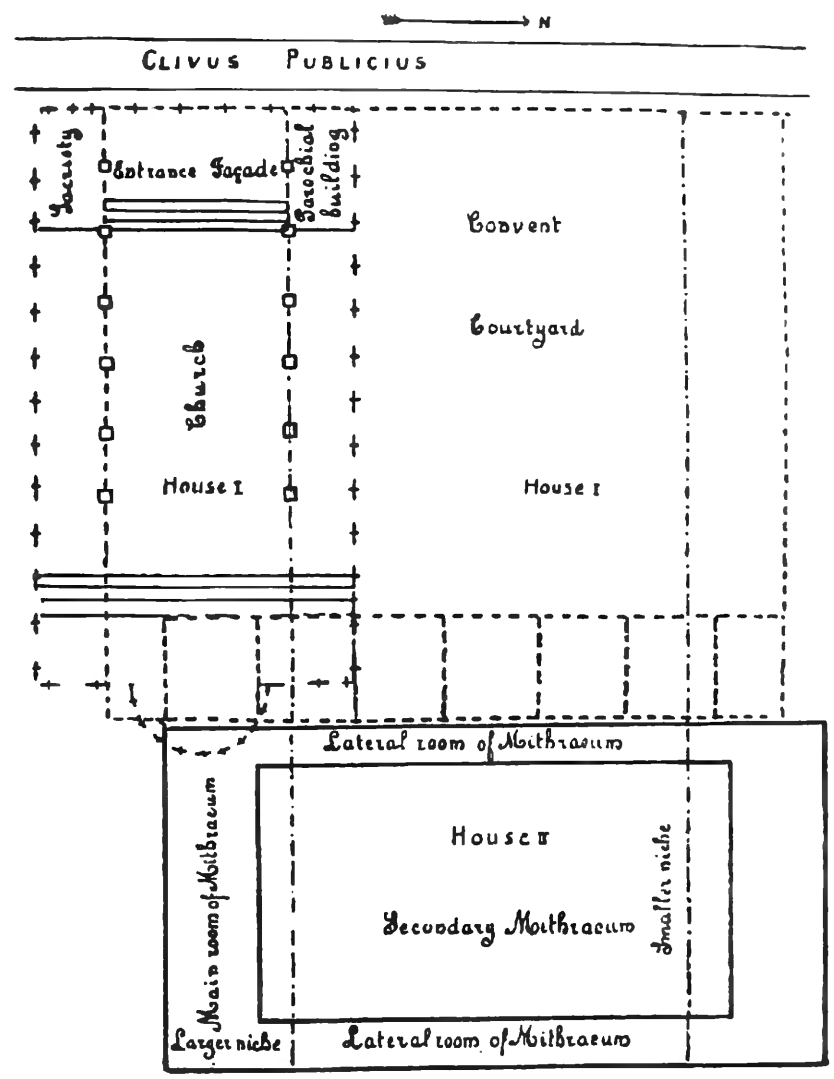


Fig. 2: Groundplan of the houses on the Vicus Publicius, where the excavatations are taking place.

state of things remained unaltered for about 70 years, until some time around the year 195 A.D. a great change took place. Both House I and House II were apparently bought by a new owner. He had two wide grooves dug right through the vaults and walls of House II in east-western direction, and heavy walls of a very different type erected there, with arches to relieve the weight. The perpendicular wall which constitutes the greater part of the back wall of the church also forms part of this complex. What exactly took place in House I we hope will be revealed by our future explorations, so far we have been able to ascertain that the south wall of the parochial building was part of the same system. The purpose of these high thick walls is not

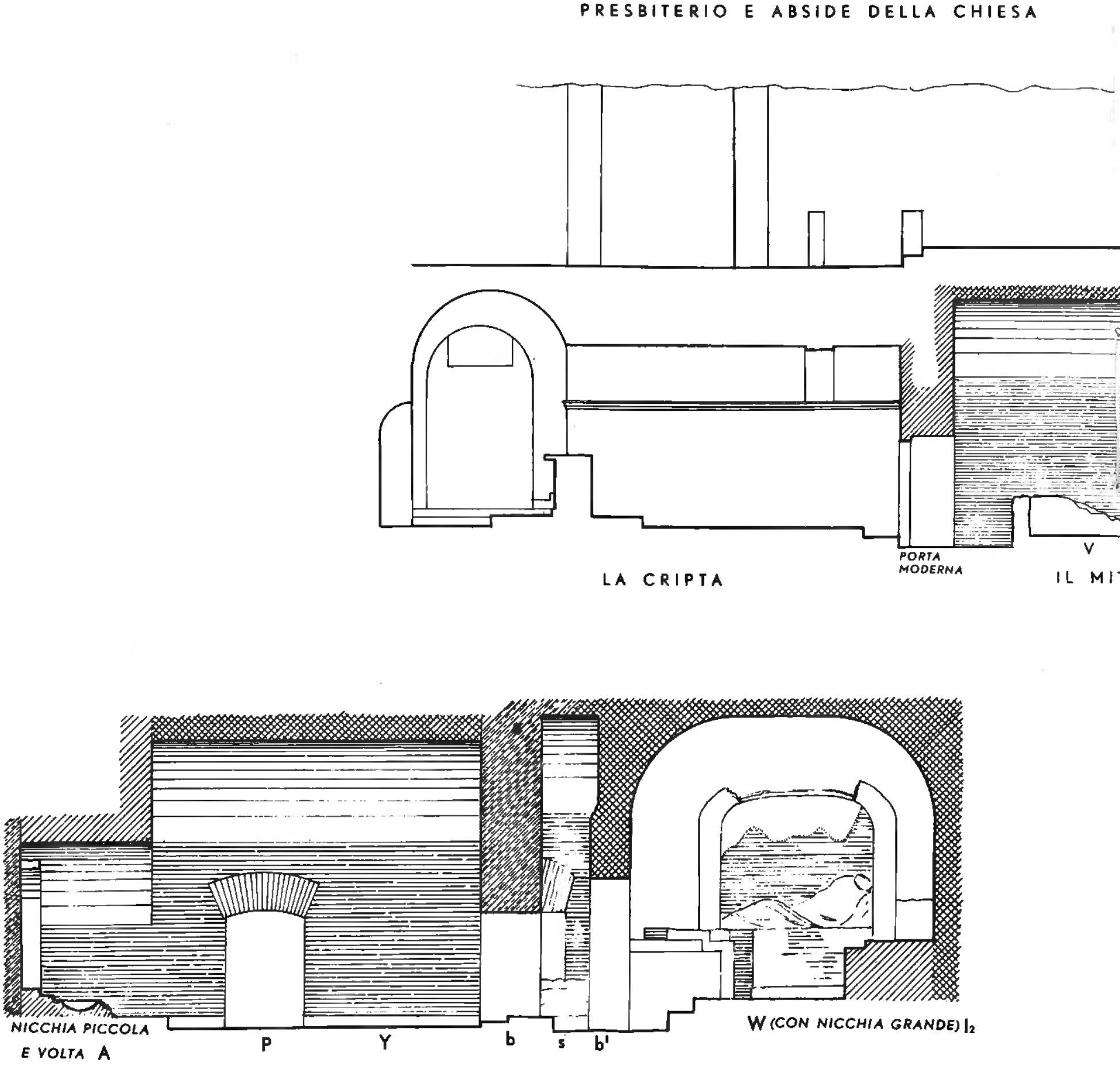
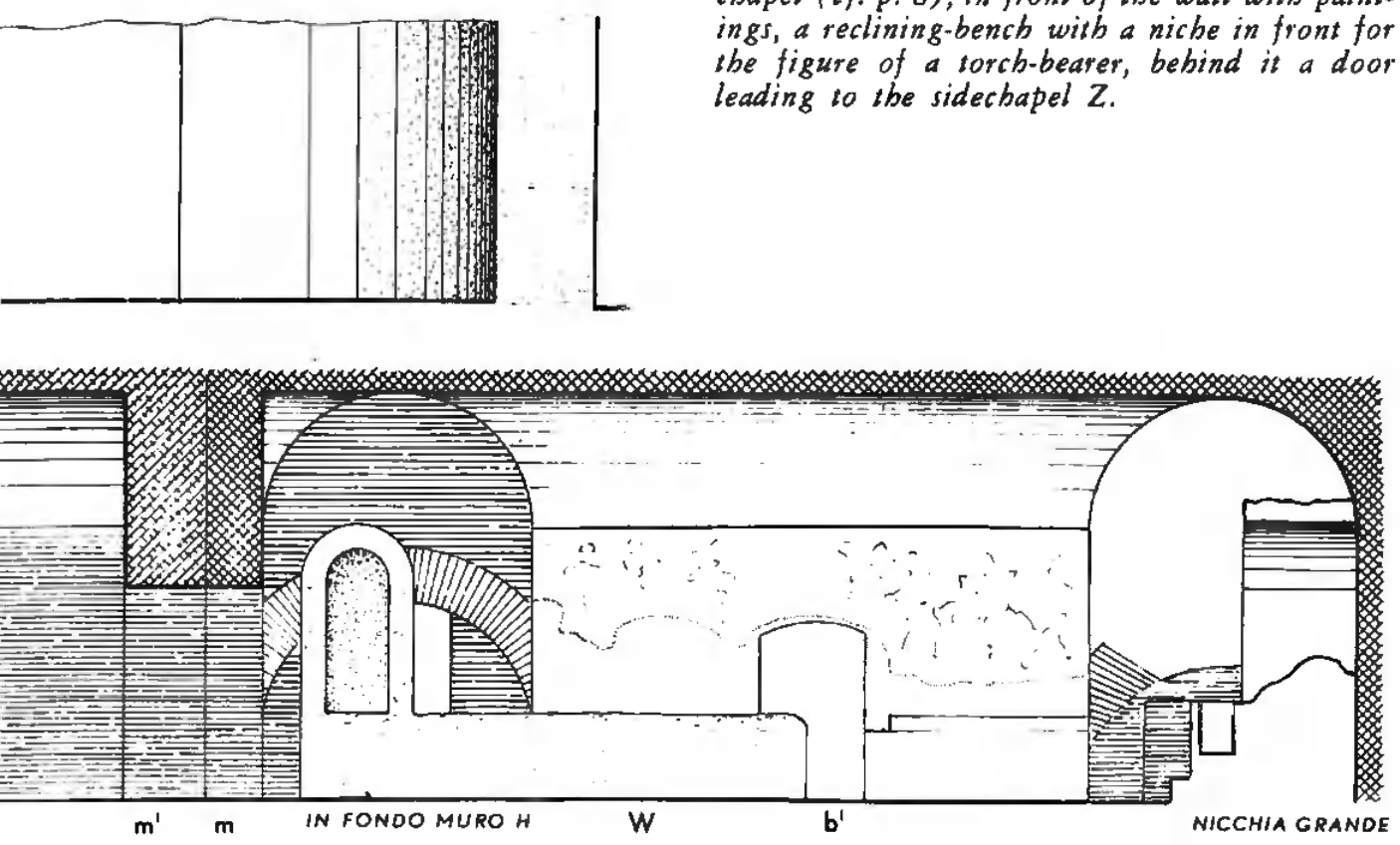


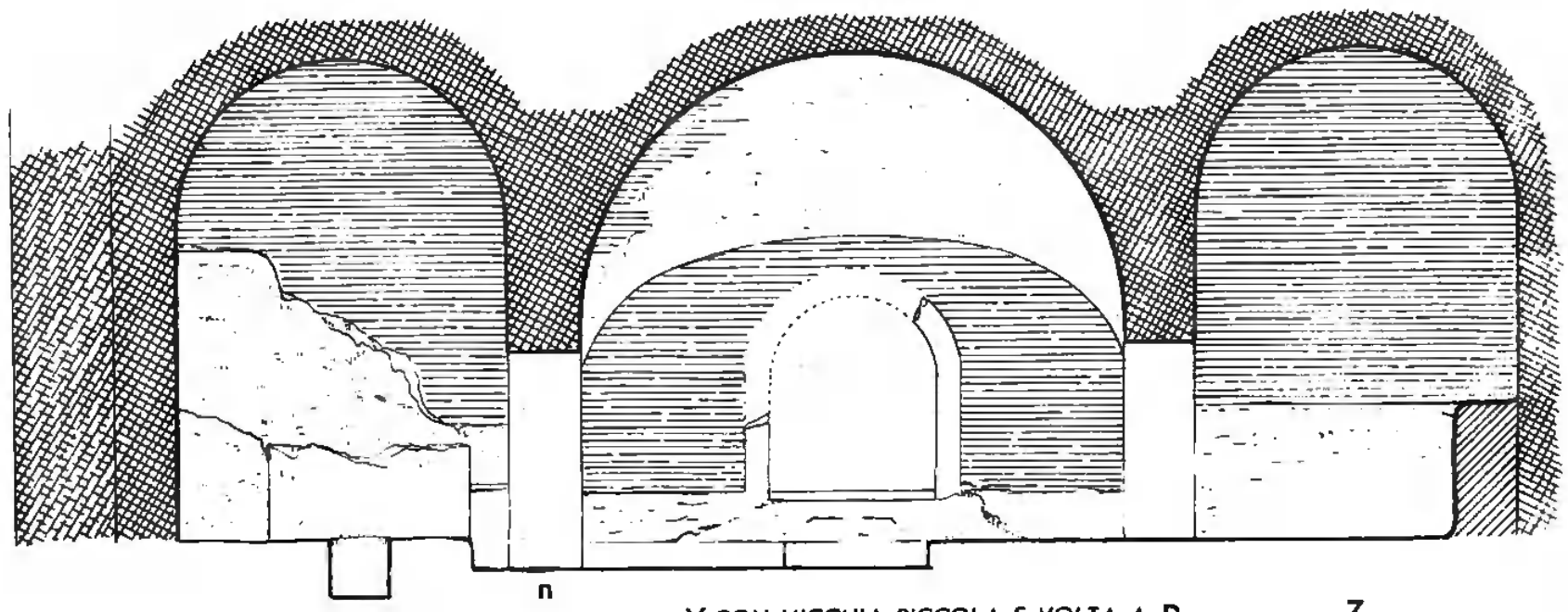
Fig. 3b: Section of the Mithraeum. To the right, view of the arched niche with the statue of the reclining god.

Drawings by O.

Fig. 3a: Section of the Mithraeum. To the far right, view of the arched sanctuary niche, in the centre, door b¹, with gives access to the large central chapel (cf. p. 8), in front of the wall with paintings, a reclining-bench with a niche in front for the figure of a torch-bearer, behind it a door leading to the sidechapel Z.



REO - SEZ. A-B (CON VISTA VERSO NORD)



SEZ. C - D (CON VISTA VERSO NORD)

Fig. 3c: Section of the three side chapels. The central one has a niche with a basin in front.

appiabianca, 1954.

yet clear to us, one thing is certain: they had nothing to do with the lay-out of the Mithraeum, which we are now going to deal with, and which, nevertheless, was built approximately at the same time. Had this lay-out been envisaged, a number of clumsy solutions would no doubt have been avoided, and several small alterations proved unnecessary. In any case, it was at that time, or perhaps a few months or weeks later, that the new owner turned over the underground-rooms of House II to the community of the followers of the Persian god Mithras, who fitted it out for their purposes (fig. 3a; plate I).

III

It may seem strange, that the owner, probably a businessman, should have picked on his underground rooms for his god Mithras. The rooms were barely lit, while Mithras is specifically the God of Light, whose worship had spread from Iran over Asia Minor to the West, and whose mysteries had acquired great popularity in Rome at that time.[2]) But the Mithras worshippers harboured a primeval tradition which they derived from the prophet Zarathustra himself: Mithras, the invincible sun-god, was to be worshipped in a cave, in the vicinity of running water.[3]) And these conditions were here magnificently fulfilled: the passages were vaulted, and there was a fountain. The cave was a symbol of the celestial vault, from which Mithras was miraculously re-born on the 25th of December of each year.[4])

The founders arranged the temple according to the usual lay-out. (fig. 3 b) A central passage, with a floor set with large tiles, and high benches on both sides. Here the believers reclined — the normal position at meals during antiquity — during the celebration of ceremonies. In the recently discovered Mithraeum in London[5]) a few pieces of black leather with gold leaf decoration were found, obviously pieces of the fine cushions they used to lean on. The front part of the benches is painted red. In the back wall (beside the fountain), small pieces of pumice stone were inserted, to create the impression of a grotto, for it is in a cave that Mithras slays the cosmic bull, thus releasing new life in nature. Unfortunately, no remains of this first representation have been preserved — it was probably a painting.

The side walls were painted, a rather remarkable fact. For among the hundreds of temples of the god, known to us throughout the Roman Empire, and built on behalf of business and military men, a very few only are decorated with paintings.[6]) We know a few in Ostia (this seaport of Rome alone possessed 17 Mithras temples![7]) and a single one in Rome (under the Palazzo Barberini) and a painted niche in a Mithraeum of the Caracalla Thermae; one in Capua, and one in Dura-Europos, a garrison place on the Euphrates in Syria. We can already say something about the St.Prisca paintings of this first period, because later on, a second layer of painted stucco was laid on, which was smashed by Christian neighbours, thus revealing bits and pieces of the earlier paintings.

The right-hand wall is divided in two by a door, leading both to the shrine and to a room still awaiting further exploration. On the part nearest the back wall there is a representation of seven members of the Mithras worship, walking in procession. These members all represent a certain hierarchy (we shall come back to that presently). On the part adjoining the entrance there is a second procession

[2]) M. J. VERMASEREN: *De Mithrasdienst in Rome (The Cult of Mithras in Rome)*. Nijmegen 1951.
[3]) PORPHYRIUS: *De Antro Nympharum*, 5—6.
[4]) M. J. VERMASEREN: *The Miraculous Birth of Mithras*, in *Studia G. van Hoorn*. Leiden 1951, pp. 93ff.
[5]) *The Illustrated London News*, 9-X-1954, p. 596.
[6]) These monuments will be described in M. J. VERMASEREN: *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*, I, 's-Gravenhage 1955.
[7]) G. BECATTI: *Scavi di Ostia*, II, *I Mitrei*. Roma 1954.

of initiates bearing various offerings. Finally a third and longer cortege was depicted on the left-hand wall, once again members of the community with various offerings. One of them is easily distinguishable: he is bearing a palm-branch, a symbol of victory, in his hand.

The absolutely unique discovery, however, which is not to be found in any other Mithraeum anywhere, consists in the lines of liturgic hymns. Even ancient writers, including the church-fathers, leave us entirely in the dark in this matter. Hence the lament of FRANZ CUMONT, who wrote the best work on the Mithras mysteries: *"If we only possessed a Mithras missal,* [8]*) how much more we should know about this doctrine and its ceremonies!"* And now we do possess a few lines of these texts! They are written in metrical form (hexameters and pentameters), but do not constitute complete hymns. According to our calculations, the left-hand wall should comprise thirteen lines, but these do not form a sequence. So we should realize we are dealing with the initial lines of these hymns: the believers probably knew them all by heart. We shall go deeper into the subject presently, when these lines have been completely deciphered, and the five lines or so on the right-hand wall uncovered. For the time being, we shall mention one specimen only:

Viros servasti eternali sanguine fuso, 'you have saved men by the spilling of the eternal blood', in other words: Now you, Mithras, have slain the bull, and thereby given new life to mankind, you also create new life for your followers in the hereafter. These followers were all men, for we know that women were not admitted to the cult.

There is a small ante-room belonging to this temple of the first period.

Along two of its walls there were high benches, and in one of the opposite corners, beside the entrance to the shrine proper, there was an enclosed space, probably used for the slaughtering of smaller animals for offerings and ritual meals.

Fig. 4: Drawing of a marble group of Mithras as bull-slayer for comparison with the group of St.Prisca.

IV

It seems that somewhere around the year 200 A.D., very shortly after its foundation, the back wall of the Mithraeum was given a more impressive aspect. A large niche was built against the wall, arched, and thus presenting the appearance of a cave. The side walls of this niche were painted with scenes borrowed from the legends woven around the heroic deeds of Mithras' life on earth. But we know nothing of these representations, for twenty years later, about 220 A.D., the cult had acquired so many supporters that an enlargement seemed imperative. (fig. 3c) This was carried out very thoroughly and at great cost. A clever stucco-worker decorated the whole of the Mithraeum; the paintings on the two side-walls were overlaid with new ones; the ante-room and three side-rooms were added to the temple. The entrance to the shrine was opened up so that believers could follow the ceremonies more closely from the benches in the ante-room. Repre-

[8]) FR. CUMONT: *Textes et Monuments relatifs aux mystères de Mithra,* I-II. Bruxelles 1896—1899.

sentations in stucco were placed in the enclosed part: giants with serpents, or seamonsters with dolphinshaped legs. The sacrifial altar was painted a bright red.

The greatest change was that suffered by the niche. On the back wall a new representation in stucco of Mithras as the bull-killer was placed. (fig. 4) The killing of the bull is the god's most significant feat. [9]) After hunting the bull according to the instruction of the supreme god, he succeeds, at the cost of great efforts, in capturing and overpowering the animal, which he then carries off on his shoulders as a hero *(transitus dei),* to kill it later on in the cave. A great miracle then occurs. From the blood of the dying animal, from its spinal marrow and its tail, fresh plants and full corn ears suddenly spring. Out of death new life has risen, awakened by Mithras, who actually performs this deed in spite of himself. For this harsh feat would have been unnecessary if the animal, the magnificent creation of the supreme God of Good, had not been threatened by the eternal opponent, the God of Evil. It was from a raven that Mithras received his imperative mission. The dog, his trusted hunting-fellow, and the snake, the earth-symbol, lick up the blood flowing from the bull, and thus are the first to benefit by the new fertility; the scorpion, the envoy of Evil, once more seeks to corrupt the seed of the noble beast. No wonder this representation was placed in every Mithraeum, and believers knelt before it in worship. For by this deed, Mithras, the God of Fertility and of Good Fortune, gave the greatest proof of his formidable power, thus solving the problem of propagation. The pilasters of the niche are decorated, like the Ara Pacis, with interlaced twigs, branching out again and again and thus emphasizing the fertility motif. A number of fragments of this group have been preserved: first of all the head of Mithras (plate III), adorned with a pointed phrygian cap; this head is beautifully done and the expressive, cast-up gaze immediately reminds us of the Hellenistic Pergamon sculptures. Besides, large fragments of Mithras' red cloak and of the white bull have been preserved, as well as the front part of the dog.

The side walls of the niche were also decorated with representations in stucco. On the left, the miraculous birth of Mithras from the rock: impelled by dynamic forces, the God of Light rises from the celestial vault. This representation may be based on the memory of primitive times, when man first realized that light could spring from the striking of a flint. In other, better preserved representations, the god is shown bearing a burning torch and a dagger in his upraised hands.

On the right-hand wall, there was a scene referring to the capture of the white bull. The predominant colours are red and deep blue.

V

In order to assess correctly the value of this new niche, we should compare it with a relief from Bologna (plate II). [10]) In the cave, we see again the killing of the bull. But the significant fact is that the edges of the cave are decorated with the heads of the seven planet-gods. The middle one is a bearded god, bearing a small basket on his head, which caracterizes him as the Egyptian god Serapis. When, in August 1954, we uncovered a small room beside the niche, probably the sacristy, a number of fragments of stucco and several heads (mostly damaged) where brought to light. We have, in all, the testimony of seven heads: one head of Serapis (plate IV); one of Mithras, belonging to one of the scenes in the niche; one eye; one eye with eyebrow; the upper part of a head (?) with leaf-garland; the greater part of the head of a god with loose, flowing hair, and a particularly well-preserv-

[9]) LEROY CAMPBELL: *Typology of Mithraic Tauroctones,* in *Berytus* XI, 1954, pp. 1-60.

[10]) P. DUCATI: *Guida del Museo Civico di Bologna,* 1923, p. 69.

Plate III:

Head of Mithras in stucco, belonging to the representation of the bull-slaying.

(photo Vivarelli).

Plate IV:

Head of the Egyption god Serapis, in stucco.

(photo Nash).

ed woman's head. This last is very delicately modelled: the hair falls from the head in heavy locks, the nose is joined to the forehead by a straight line, the cheeks are rounded, the eyes are large with painted pupils, and together with the small, half open mouth give the face a soft expression (plate V). This head differs from the head of Mithras in that the eyes in the head of the god are engraved; the points of resemblance are the nose, the small mouth and the rounded chin. There is nothing there to imply that we are dealing with a moon-goddess; in that case this head would probably have been placed in the top right-hand corner of the bull-killing scene. As it is, we are led to suppose that this head was affixed, like the others, to the edge of the grotto, as in the Bologna relief. This goddess should therefore be identified with the planet Venus. The head with the streaming hair was found lying close to this head of Venus, as well as the eye with eyebrow, which must have belonged to another god. As in the planetary system held in honour at St. Prisca, Venus is placed in between Mars and Mercury, it is not impossible that these two heads may represent these planet-gods.

But what about the head of Serapis? On the Bologna relief we can see that the planet Saturnus bears the characteristic *modius* of Serapis, and this is further confirmed by several other representations. Should we allow this magnificent head a place on the margin of the grotto, together with the others? For the time being, this would seem the best possible solution, but on the other hand, we should consider that this new, precious and unique copy so closely related to the impressive Zeus of Otricoli from the Rotonda of the Vatican Musea, measures half a metre, and is *very* heavy. It was,in fact, so heavy, that the Christians who tried to haul it away, had to drop it not far from the niche, close to the entrance to the sacristy. Moreover, the grotto is 40 cms. high and the Venus-head 29 cms. (fig. 3b and plate V) The place within the cult niche is entirely occupied by a reclining figure, also carried out in stucco. The torso of this divinity is bare and painted red; the legs and the lower part of the figure are draped in a cloak with heavy folds, further emphasized by some deep-blue painting. The god is reclining on his left side, leaning on a few water-jars. Both arms are missing. Behind his shoulders there are remains of a billowing, pale-blue drapery, a *velum* drooping from his head. This figure thus displays all the characteristics of a water-god, whom, in accordance with an inscription from a Mithraeum in Heddernheim (Germania), we can identify with the god Oceanus. [11]) We have found representations of this figure done in marble, in Mérida (Spain) and London and it can be met with

Fig. 5: Oceanus assisting at the birth of Mithras, on a relief from Virunum.

[11]) CUMONT, *op.cit.*, II No. 255 figs. 289-291.

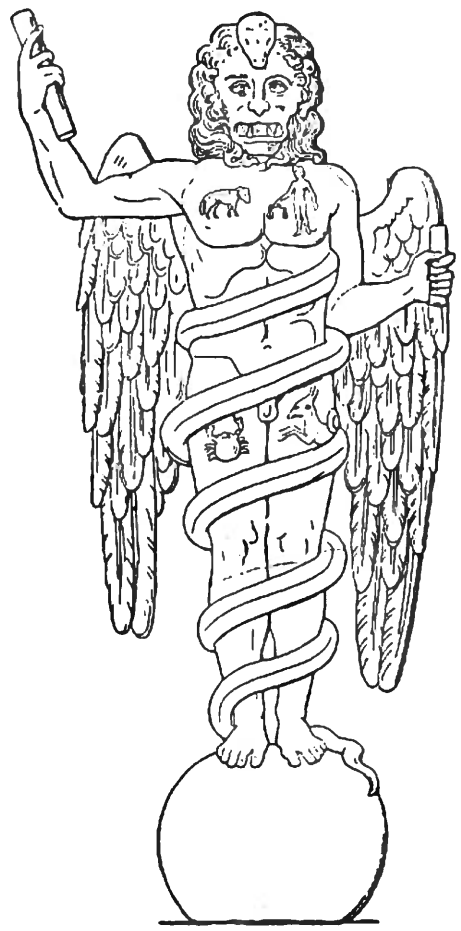


Fig. 6: Standing marble statue of the Mithraic Chronos (Rome, Vatican).

on a number of Mithras reliefs. It is often encountered in scenes depicting the birth of Mithras, which, according to various traditions, took place on the banks of a river. Thus, the god sometimes wears the horns of a bull on his forehead (fig. 5), like the river-gods. Moreover, the followers of Mithras had a particular reverence for the water-element. In the St.Prisca Mithraeum this group is particularly notable, because of the part played by the original fountain. The water may have sprung from a bowl in the god's left hand, then flowed down into a masonry basin in front of the cult niche, and then run along an underground canal under the floor of the Mithraeum. A lead pipe found at the bottom of the basin by earlier excavators seems to point that way. At the same time, however, the billowing *velum* alludes to the celestial vault, and thus confers on the god one of the characteristics of a god of heaven, whom in agreement with another inscription from Heddernheim we can call Celum *(caelum)*. He also appears on representations from various Mithraea at the birth of, but also at the killing of the bull by Mithras. On a relief from Pettau, [12]) a dagger is lying beside him, which he will presently hand over to the new-born Mithras; on other reliefs he is carrying a *harpè,* a dagger with a sickle-shaped hook, an attribute of Saturnus. This Saturnus is, like Oceanus, a source of life in nature. He is, besides, the most powerful of the seven planet-gods, and so is shown either leading them, or in a central position. But at the same time he is, in terms of the Mithras mysteries, equalled to Cronos, the God of Eternal Time (Chronos). (fig. 6) This dual aspect endows him with a dual function in mithraic representations: on the one hand he is the ancient time-god, who dies on the 24th of December and rises anew as the young Mithras, who thus embodies the new Chronos on December 25th. On the other hand, he is the fertility-bearing god who is present at the fertilizing act of Mithras, who, by the killing of the bull, inaugurates a new, happy era. We shall see presently that the leader of the Mithraic community, the representative of Mithras on earth, is placed, according to their doctrine, under the special protection of Saturnus.

We might ask whether it would be possible to place the head of Serapis on the body of the reclining god. In that case we should be dealing with a particularly uncommon representation of Serapis, who was worshipped in Egypt as the god of fertility and of the realm of the dead. [13]) We are fully justified in asking this question, as the *modius* is cut off at the top and slightly curved, so that the surface could be joined to the *velum* if that were complete. There are, moreover, coins from Sinope from the third century A.D. (thus contemporary with this figure),

[12]) *Studia G. van Hoorn,* Pl. XXIII, fig. 5.
[13]) PAULY-WISSOWA: *R.E.,* s.v. *Serapis;* ROSCHER: *Mythol. Lexikon,* s.v. *Serapis.*

reproducing such scenes, [14]) and in Sinope on the Black Sea, Serapis was the object of particular veneration because, according to some of the Serapis legends, it was from this place that Serapis was brought to Egypt. This question will have to be shelved for the time being, until it has been possible to fit the head to the figure. An argument against this theory is furnished by a report by A. FERRUA, who gave us the first scientific reports on the private excavations carried out by the Augustine monks of the nearby monastery, between 1934 and 1937. [15]) He mentions that among the stucco fragments in the niche, several were found to belong to a head of very large dimensions: a nose and a mouth, several locks of hair, part of the forehead and an eyebrow and a huge right hand. All these pieces were gilt, and this gilding was often applied during antiquity to indicate the divine character of a figure. At present these pieces are lost, and the right hand only has been preserved. It is a right hand, grasping some object, probably the end of a *cornucopia* like those often carried by these gods. A similar hand was also found in the recently discovered London Mithraeum,[16]) which is probably a dedication and points to the bull-killing. By reconstructing the St. Prisca group, we shall obtain something closely akin to famous sculptures such as the "Nile" and the "Tiber", both found on the site of the Serapeum on the Campus Martius in Rome. Recently other statues of the Nile and the Tiber were found in the Canopus of the Villa of Hadrian in Tivoli, which also harboured a Serapeum.

We have not yet, so far, answered the question of how the Egyptian mystery-god Serapis came to be included in the Mithras mysteries, and why he then came to be identified with Saturnus.

The writers of antiquity almost unanimously attribute the origins of the Serapis worship to Ptolemeus I Sôter, who as a successor of Alexander the Great, administered the Egyptian part of the empire as a pharaoh. Closely following Alexander's policy of fusion, he wished to introduce into the Nile country a new cult which would be satisfactory both to the Egyptians themselves and to the Greek settlers. With this view in mind, he consulted an Egyptian priest, Manetho, and a priest from Eleusis, Timotheos. The result was a fusion of the God of the Dead, Osiris, and the ancient worship of the bull Apis: Osirapis produced Serapis. A new representation of this god was called for, and there are some divergences in the reports of the writers of antiquity concerning this search. But they seem to concur in ascribing the creation of the large statue placed in the magnificent Serapeum in Alexandria to the talent of the Carian artist Bryaxis, famous for his contribution to the handsome mausoleum in Halicarnassus. We possess a number of copies of this work. The god sat on a throne in a lordly attitude, his sandal-clad feet resting on a foot-stool adorned with lion paws. In his upraised right hand he held a scepter, his arm was draped in the heavy folds of a himation which partly covered a thin transparent chiton. The scepter and draperies were either made of gold, or gilt. The head was slightly inclined to the right, the eyes were white and the pupils made of precious stones. The abundant hair hung like a lion's mane round the impressive and benevolent, though melancholy face. The forehead was covered by five thick locks of hair. The thick beard and whiskers were irregularly divided. On his head he wore a *modius* adorned with three olive branches and a corn ear. With his right hand he caressed the head of a serpent twined round the body of a Cerberus lying at his feet. This Cerberus, together with

14) G. LIPPOLD: *Serapis und Bryaxis,* in *Festschrift P. Arndt.* München 1925, pp. 115-127.
15) A. FERRUA: *Il Mitreo di Santa Prisca.* Roma 1941, p. 12.
16) *The Illustrated London News,* loc.cit.
17) *The Illustrated London News,* 5-II-1955, pp. 222-223.
18) FR. CUMONT: *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain,* (4th ed.). Paris 1929, pp. 69ff; W. AMELUNG: *Le Sarapis de Bryaxis,* in *Rev. Arch.* 1903, pp. 177-204.

the dark blue colour of the image, characterizes him as a god of the underworld; the small basket on his head indicates fertility. Fertility is born from the underworld, and Serapis is a ruler both in the upper- and the underworld, which makes him closely akin to Mithras. The Cerberus has three heads: the middle one is a lion's head, the left-hand one the head of a dog, who affectionately rubs his head against the knee of the god; the right-hand head is that of a wolf with menacing fangs. These heads have been explained by MACROBIUS along symbolic lines. [19]) The lion's head points to the present, that of the wolf to the past, and that of the affectionate dog to the future. So there is a connecting link with time, and thus the finding of a similar Cerberus, with a snake wound round his body, [20]) on the representation of a Mithraic Chronos at Castel Gandolfo is not purely accidental. We might mention, by the way, that another of the attributes of this time-god is the hydra, which takes us back to the sphere of the water-god. Thus Serapis is a Chronos-Saturnus and therefore can also be a young Mithras, and consequently a sun-god. This theory is confirmed by an inscription from the Mithraeum of the Caracalla Thermae in Rome. This contains a dedication to Zeus-Helios-Serapis-Kosmokratôr. [21]) Later the name of Serapis was erased and simply replaced by that of Mithras. Helioserapis, as some inscriptions called the Egyptian god, can thus take the place of the planet Saturnus, and that of the Mithraic Chronos-figure, whose body has a snake twined around it, which represents an allusion to the course of the sun along the signs of the Zodiac. These signs are sometimes represented in the space between the winding of the snake, or, as on a paintig from the Barberini Mithraeum, surrounding the figure of Saturnus-Chronos, standing on a globe.

This exposition of the theories concerning the connection between the Egyptian and the Iranian mysteries has made it abundantly clear that the Mithracists of the Mithras community on the Aventine had a leader who had fully fathomed the deep symbolic significance of the representations he had commissioned from the various artists. We do not know whether this leader was also the owner of this large palace in this fashionable quarter, or not.

VI

A deep symbolic significance also emerges very clearly from the paintings on the side walls of this temple. We are referring to the paintings of its major enlargement somewhere around 220 A.D. We know from written testimonies that anyone wishing to be admitted to the Mithras mysteries, anyone who wanted to join this extensive Mithras fraternity, had to be prepared to submit to rigorous demands of self-discipline. If he complied with certain exigencies of discipline and had learned to observe absolute secrecy, he could be initiated. We can see this ceremony on some paintings on the walls of the benches in the Mithraeum at Capua. [22]) Naked as a newborn child, now about to be born again through his admission to the cult, he is led in blindfolded. Facing the members, he must kneel in the centre passage of the lamp-lit temple. His hands are tied behind his back, with chicken-guts. These fetters must be symbolically cut with a sword by the Father, the head of the community. By this act the myst is made free, and the Father before him his liberator. Once the blindfold has been removed, and the adept has sworn the oath of secrecy *(sacramentum)* into the hands of the Father, and has been submitted to certain purification rites, he has become a member. He has now joined the militant hosts of Mithras, the invincible sun-god, and must fight for Good and for the suppression of Evil. Only by a complete surrender to Mithras can he

[19]) MACROBIUS: *Sat.*, I, 20, 13.
[20]) R. PETTAZZONI: *Essays on the History of Religions.* Leiden 1954, pp. 164-170.
[21]) FR. CUMONT - L. CANET: *Mithra ou Sarapis Kosmokratôr,* in *Compt.Rend.Ac. Inscr.*, 1919, pp. 313ff.
[22]) A. MINTO in *Notizie degli Scavi* (S.V.), XXI, 1924, pp. 353ff.

Plate V: Head of the goddess Venus, in stucco.
(photo Nash).

Plate VI:

Niche with reclining figure. On the back wall there was a representation of the bull-slaying. Bordering the niche there were heads of the planet gods. In front of the niche, a water-basin. *(See page 15)*

make sure of being himself assisted by the god in his struggles during this life and the next. But he must always strive for perfection, and this ascent to perfection is expressed in a symbolic ladder of seven steps and an order of seven successive grades closely related to the seven planets. We find the first complete representation of this order on a piece of the right-hand side wall in the Mithraeum of St. Prisca: the Raven *(Corax);* the Male Bride *(Nymphus)*; the Soldier *(Miles)*; the Lion *(Leo)*; the Persian *(Perses)*; the Sun-runner *(Heliodromus)*; the Father *(Pater)*. On this wall the representatives of all existing grade-bearers are presented in a solemn procession. First the Corax, unfortunately badly damaged. He is named after the Raven who in representations of the bull-killing appears to entrust Mithras with his mission. He is a herald, a *Keryx* (a pun is used, corax - kerux), and therefore enjoys the protection of Mercury, herald of the gods. Like the two following grades, he belongs to the lower gods. Before him walks the *Nymphus,* the Male Bride, because women were not admitted to the mysteries. He is wearing a veil on his head, and carrying a burning lamp in his veiled hands. During his special initiation, he is joined to Mithras by a mystical marriage. He is seen joining hands with the Father, representative of Mithras *(junctio dextrarum),* as in a real marriage ceremony. He is under the protection of Venus, the Goddess of Love.

The *Miles* is the true Mithras soldier. He is here represented dressed in brown, with his kitbag slung over his left shoulder. Arrows are dangling from his belt. He is placed under the supervision of Mars, the God of War, and whenever he has been victorious in battle and is offered a garland in reward, he must refuse this distinction with the words: "Mithras alone is my garland".

The Soldier is holding on with his right hand to the red train of the Lion who precedes him, advancing with a solemn stride. He is placed in the centre of the cortege and forms the transition from the lower to the higher grades. He is the symbol of the fire element and therefore wrapped in a scarlet robe. At his initiation he can no longer be purified by water, the water-element being hostile to fire. He enjoys the protection of Jove who throws the thunderbolt. In his hands he bears a fireshovel; his fiery red clothing is trimmed with coal-black piping. He is preceded by a Persian whose name reminds us of the Persian origins of Mithras. Like the Lion, he must be purified with honey. He carries a sickle and a bunch of corn ears. He is clothed in a white tunic and is placed under the protection of the pale moon-goddess, who promotes fertility. Hence, the Persian's name of Keeper of the Fruits.

At the head of the procession strides the Sun-Runner, dressed in a red tunic with a wide yellow belt. He wears a flowing cloak, and is in immediate contact with the sun-god under whose particular care he is placed, and whom he embodies in the Mithras communitiy. Like the sun, he carries a globe in his left hand and wears a nimbus and halo round his head. His right hand is raised in greeting towards the Father, the Head of the temple. The Pater is clothed like Mithras himself, in a red robe. He is sitting on a throne like a ruler, and returns the greeting. As the wise initiate, he wears the philosopher's beard and holds a staff in his hand. He therefore greatly resembles the two Fathers who are portrayed in long, richly embroidered robes, and with Phrygian caps on their heads on either side of the cult niche in the Mithraeum at Dura Europos. [23]) They are there shown holding a staff and a scroll in their hands. The Father is the *pater familias* of the fraternity of initiates, teacher of the pupils, and dispenses initiation into the mysteries; he is, in short, the deputy of Mithras on earth.

[23]) M. ROSTOVTZEFF, et al.: *The Excavations at Dura-Europos. Preliminary Report of the Seventh and Eight Seasons of Work.* New Haven 1939, pp. 110ff and Pls. XVI-XVII.

These representations of this procession of grade bearers are quite unique. They are, however, corroborated by inscriptions from several temples. Last year's excavations at Ostia in particular added considerably, through their mosaics and paintings, to our knowledge of these grade bearers. We meet here with an allusion to the gates of the planet spheres, which are passed by souls on their way down to earth at birth, and again on their ascending after death to be consumed, after final purification, in the sun's eternal fire. In another Ostia mosaic we find the various emblems characterizing each of the grade bearers, and they tally with the data of St. Prisca. In the Mithraeum of the Pareti dipinte, another procession was depicted on one of the walls, but only a few blurred vestiges have been preserved. The other wall displayed a Nymphus with a crown of leaves and a mirror (Venus), a Lion with a torch, a Soldier with a lance, and a Heliodromus with a nimbus, though this last might represent a Persian, being placed near a fruit tree. [24])

In the Mithraeum at Dura-Europos, special attention was given to the Nymphi, sixteen of whom have been reported there. In the Mithraeum in Rome, the Lions are particularly emphasized. For two more processions are depicted there, constituted almost entirely by these important grade bearers, and this we know because their names were inscribed in *dipinti* (painted characters) against them. The right hand wall, separated by a door from the painting of the seven grades, displays a procession of five initiates, all clad in tunics, mostly of brown colour. They wear their hair cropped close and a short round beard. They are headed by a man — the greater part of this figure is missing — leading a white bull. Of this animal only the hind part has been preserved. It is followed by a man carrying a large, handsome cock with both hands. This figure, as well as several others, is turned towards us in a trois-quarts position. The Lion behind him — his name is Nicephorus — is leaning forward, driving a ram before him, (plate VII) thus steering the animal on its right course and preventing its running away. The figure of Nicephorus is very well preserved. He is painted in the impressionistic manner: his pupils are placed in the corners of the eyes, and if we study him more closely, we can see that he is completely absorbed in the ritual. His tunic is trimmed with purple piping. Another Leo, whose name has been lost, follows behind him. He is carrying a large wine-vessel in both hands (plate VIII). The cortege ends with another stooping figure, driving a fat pig, its body adorned with a large ribbon, to the slaughter.

We are thus dealing here with a well-known Roman sacrifice, the *suovetaurilia,* with the addition of the cock and the wine-vessel. There are further examples of this feature in purely Roman representations, still we should observe that the bull is leading the procession, and that it is white, like the bulls in the cult niche and in the Capua painting. Cocks were frequently sacrificed, whenever the sacrifice of larger animals, like the one before us, proved too costly. In the Mithraea, the cock often finds a place beside the torch-bearer, symbolizing the ascending light, or beside Mithras himself. This was meant to indicate that the crowing of the cock at dawn puts evil spirits to flight. But then we have also seen that the arms of initiates were bound with the guts of chickens. It is interesting to note that at the extreme end of the bench, a niche was built in, with the torchbearer and the cock (see below). The *krater* points to the use of wine or water in the solemn ceremonies about to be enacted when the cortege reached its destination.

The representation of a *suovetaurilia* in a Mithraeum is quite unique. It is here in this Mithraeum on the Aventine that we first meet with this ancient Roman sacrifice. As a rule it is closely connected with the god Mars. In imperial times it was also performed on official occasions, but in earlier

[24]) BECATTI, *op.cit.,* pp. 59-68 and Pls. XII-XIII.

Plate VII
The "Lion" Nikeforus
(Photo E. v. d. Enden)

Fig. 7: Mithras and Sol at the sacred repast. Painting in the Mithraeum at Dura-Europos.

days it occurred at the founding of new cities. Our impression is, that this particular painting was meant to revive the memory of the sacrifice performed on the occasion of the extension of the new community. This important happening represented, as it were, a new foundation, and this historical moment was to be recorded in this painting. In this case, the Lions might represent historical characters. But we do not know whether the name of Nicephorus, and the other names occurring elsewhere on the paintings, were proper names or cult names, given them at their initiation. These names were of Greek origin and might point to the Eastern descent of the initiates: Nicephorus, Heliodorus, Theodorus, Phoibus, Gelasius, respectively stand for: Bearer of Victory, Gift of the Sun, Gift of God, The Shining One (one of the epithets of Apollo), The Laughing One, and thus are directly related to the invincible sun-god, whose gifts of fertility were joyfully accepted. When the bull walking ahead of them is killed, the great deed of the god shall be remembered.

The left-hand wall shows a long procession of Lions, some of them also carrying wine-vessels and cocks. There is, moreover, a figure carefully carrying a cut-up cake in a glass bowl. The procession is headed by a man in a yellow ochre tunic, trimmed with red piping. In his right hand he holds a burning candle and is carrying a further supply of candles. He has come to a stop in front of the dark blue, shell-like grotto, lit by the glimmer of the haloes round the heads of Mithras and the sun-god.

This meeting of Mithras and Sol (fig. 7) is the last before their departure from this earth, when they both ascend to Heaven in their chariot, the sun-god goading on his swift horses with his whip. Before that, they have contracted a blood-alliance to attest their one-ness. Now they are reclining together, partaking of the sacred meal, when they will consume the flesh of the slaughtered bull and drink its blood. This most important moment is represented in a number of Mithras reliefs. [25]). Sometimes it takes up the background of a relief of the bull-killing. The relief was mounted on a pivot, so that whichever part of it the believers wished to contemplate during the ceremonies could be shown to them. Sometimes the sphere in which this act is performed is purely divine, and gods only partake in it. But as this divine meal must service an example to the believers who will imitate it in their Mithraea, it sometimes assumes the character of a human happening, and the real "participants" in the mysteries share in it. In the St.Prisca painting the holy deed is both divine and human. The example and the imitation are interwoven.

The sun-god is a Helios-Apollo, with long golden locks and noble, divinely beautiful features. His gaze is extatically turned up to heaven, like that of Mithras at the bull-killing. With ardent enthusiasm he raises his right hand, with the palm turned outwards. He is clad in a bright-red tunic encircled by a wide, yellow belt. With his left hand he is clasping a blue globe to his breast, his head is

[25]) M. J. VERMASEREN: *De Mithras-Maaltijd*, in *Annalen Thijmgenootschap* XXXVIII, 1950, pp. 18-29.

Plate VIII:

"Lion" bearing a mixing bowl in a procession, on the right hand wall of the Mithraeum.

Plate IX: (turn over)

Marble intarsia with head of Sol-Mithras.

(Photo:
Gelderse Fotohandel).

Plate
IX

surrounded by a pale blue nimbus and a shining halo. Mithras is wearing the Phrygian cap, which is red, like his clothing. His head also is surrounded by a pale blue nimbus. The gods are served by two figures, depicted on either side of the couch. On the side of Sol, a figure in a red tunic carrying a bowl of food in his hands. He is an attendant, and a Raven, for in this function he is wearing the dark-blue raven-mask. Of the other attendant, very little can be discerned. He is short of stature and is bearing a plate for Mithras, who is holding a drinking-horn in his upraised hand. It is a striking fact that the clothing of these two gods is the same as that of the Heliodromus and the Father in the representation of the grade-bearers. The deed of Mithras and Sol is now enacted in the Mithraeum by the Father and the Sun-Runner. The lower grades are in attendance, and will presently be allowed to partake of the food and drink which will secure salvation for them in the next world.

The Fathers of the Church have called this meal a devilish imitation of the Eucharist. They enact the Resurrection, or so they say, and partake of bread and water. [26]) But we know from the accounts engraved in the columns of the Mithraeum of Dura that meat and wine were used; [27]) bread or cake could be substituted for the meat, as we could see on the wall of the Mithraeum of St.Prisca.

Justinus records [28]) that a few words were spoken on this occasion, but so far their purport has not been ascertained. It is not impossible, of course, that these words might bear some resemblance to those spoken by Christ to his disciples. But the excavations may contribute to clear up this question. Once the upper layer of paintings from 220 A.D. has been removed with the help of our latest processes, and transferred to a canvas, it is not impossible that further lines from the hymns may be found to allude to this question. The line *"viros servasti eternali sanguine fuso"* is already closely related with this meal, which, by the way, did not occur in the original representation dated from 195 A.D.

It is now abundantly clear why the Christians of St. Prisca later on wrecked this temple in their religious zeal, and made it inaccessible. They seem to have vented their rage chiefly on this left-hand wall. Everywhere we can observe sharp axe-cuts which broke up a considerable part of the paintings, such as for instance the beautiful head of Sol. Little did they suspect that by this very act they would draw the attention of posterity to the underlying hymns. Also from the point of view of the art historian, both these layers yield magnificent material: we can make a close study of the way in which painters treated two very similar subjects in a span of 25 years, and thus of the changes in their colour schemes and their style.

We shall now shortly discuss some of the information given, and a few of the problems raised by the temple on the Aventine. On the drawing of the temple made by the Italian O. Cappabianca (plate I), we can see niches placed at the extreme end of the benches. In the right-hand niche we see a standing figure with crossed legs, and at its feet, against the treetrunk, a cock. This marble image was originally a representation of the god Mercury, but the Mithraists turned it into a torch-bearer by covering with stucco the unclothed parts, which were not in accordance with the strict morals of the believers. This image is now a representation of Cautes with uplifted torch (part of the arms has been preserved). He is a symbol of the rising light, and is therefore placed in an orange-coloured niche. His companion is Cautopates, who was placed in the oppositie niche. This figure has not yet been recovered, but it must have represented the genius of the setting light, as it was depicted with the torch pointing downwards, and the niche was painted in a

[26]) TERTULLIANUS: *De Praescr. haer.*, 40.
[27]) *Report Dura*, p. 125 Nrs. 861-862.
[28]) JUSTINUS: *Apol.*, I, 66. (p. 108 *ed. Rauschen)*.

dark colour. These two figures form a trinity with Mithras, [29]) in which Mithras represents light at its zenith. This explains why he was worshipped particularly in the middle of each month, and a special invocation may have been also addressed to him in the middle of each day. In this trinity Mithras could at the same time symbolize life itself.

VII

A point of particular interest is constituted by the three lateral chapels, which were added to the main sanctuary at the time of the enlargement of the Mithraeum, and whose excavation has now been completed.

The central chapel (room Y) shows the same lay-out as the Mithraeum, though more simply designed. (fig. 3c) Here also there is a central untiled passage, flanked by low wide benches. As in the Mithraeum itself, there is a basin in the right-hand bench (in the Mithraeum it is built into a separate niche, painted blue) and in each one of the side walls there is a door leading to the lateral rooms. The great arch set up in House II to support the upper floor now forms a magnificent introitus to the raised niche built against the back wall. On either side of this arched niche there are high narrow benches, on which lamps could be placed to light the dark room. In front of the niche there is an omega-shaped platform with a large terracotta basin before which a believer could kneel on a lower elevation. His head would thus be placed exactly above the basin, and he could then submit to purification by water in the sight of a few initiates reclining on the benches. The first impression produced by this lay-out is that we are faced, as in the Mithraeum of the Pareti di-pinte in Ostia, with a throne. [30]) In Ostia, this throne construction (its destination is clearly indicated by an inscription) amply allows for the enthronement of the Father; here, the space between the basin and the niche is definitely too small. The niche itself is decorated with stucco and painted pale blue. The inner part of the arch is blue and the front side brown. Two raised parallel circles can be discerned inside the niche. These very probably bore the signs of the zodiac. This may appear more clearly later on, when the niche can be thoroughly cleaned. In the middle a rectangular surface had been marked out by means of a border, and we may be able to connect it with a particularly valuable find. This came to light close to the door of the adjoining room on the left (Z), but may have been pulled off and thrown down there when the place was wrecked, for it was found lying face down, and, for the greater part, disconnected. It consists of a large number of small, thin pieces of different kinds of marble. The undamaged part had been imprinted with some blue paste, and in some places this paste had been underlaid with thick, unstained glass. Now this object has been patiently restored, it has turned out to be a magnificent head of Helios- Mithras- Apollo (plate IX), with flamboyant hair in red, blue and pink, and up-cast gaze. The face has a yellowish tint, and the natural colouring of the marble gives the cheeks a faint blush. The hair is discontinuous. The intention seems to have been to let the blue shine through it in the manner of a nimbus. Only a few small pieces of the mouth, the nostril and the eyes are missing. The intarsia is a gem of artistic craftsmanship. What care in the choosing of the various kinds of marble! What patience in the finish of each small fragment! Should this piece actually have been placed in the niche (perhaps a few small pieces of glass framed in a stucco edge, found in 1953 may be said to support this opinion), then this Sun god must have stood in the centre of the signs of the zodiac along which the Sun ran its annual course.

This valuable piece, in front of which the myst underwent purification, may be dated from the middle of the third century A.D., and is akin to another

[29]) PS. DIONYS. AREOP.: *Epist.*, VII.
[30]) BECATTI, *op.cit.*, Pl. XIII, 4.

Plate X: Leaden plate with representation of the head of Sol, with halo.

(photo P. Pestman).

Plate XI: Vase with boar-hunt.

head of the Sun god, found earlier on, and cut out "à jour" in a leaden plate. (plate X). Here also Sol has been given a cast-up gaze, but this head is surrounded by a halo. What a difference in sumptuousness, though, between these two pieces!

While this central chapel yielded such admirable finds (from the rubble, a beautiful little marble torso of Dionysos, closely related to a larger specimen from the Syrian temple on the Janiculus; pieces of Cologne glass, seldom found testimonies of third century trading and export between Cologne and Rome), [31]) the right-hand chapel (X) had nothing to offer save a ground-plan with benches. It did not yield up a single other find, apart from the recovery, from rubble unrelated to the Mithraeum, of a large number of fragments of a large vase, adorned on its neck and sides with a relief of a boar-hunt, and a Medusa on its handles. (plate XI) This piece can be dated from the end of the second century A.D. [32])

What this chapel may have been used for remains unexplained, unless we suppose that here an initiation by the earth element may have taken place. For there are indications that in the third chapel (Z) initiation by fire may have been performed. This chapel has two benches placed crosswise, and in the floor, at the point where these benches met, there is a large basin, containing another one with a *graffito* on the rim. This graffito will be published before long. These fire baptisms are generally well known to us from the mysteries. Should this hypothesis of initiation in the side chapels prove correct, we could then place the purification by air in the main hall, where the planets so distinctly allude to the ascent and descent through the spheres. Like the myst of the Egyptian Isis mysteries, the Mithras believer thus passes "through all of the elements" *(per omnia elementa).* [33])

These elements play a great part in the Mithraic cult. In several representations they are gathered in a symbolic group consisting of a lion, snake and wine-vessel, and a raven. As we have just seen, the lion is the symbol of fire, so the Corax must be the embodiment of air, and if we associate the Nymphus with the water element (the bride had to be bathed before the marriage ceremony, see the Nozze Aldobrandini), then we must necessarily consider the Soldier as representing the earth element. Following a first initiation, the believers would, on their assumption of one of these four grades, have to submit to a further purification rite, specially connected with the symbolic significance conferred on them. In the case of the Lion, we happen to know that he was even forbidden to be purified by water, this element being inimical to fire. Thus in the grade-bearers, both the allusions to the planets, and those to the elements are anchored. Every Mithraist must strive for this passage through the elements, and for the ascent of the planet ladder and final consumption in the solar fire. "Receive", sang the Mithraic community of St. Prisca, "receive, oh Father, oh Hallowed One, the incense-burning Lions, through whom we are offering the bull, through whom we are consumed by fire."

VIII

While these great changes were taking place in the Mithraeum during the third century, radical changes were also effected in House I. This house, or at any rate its southern part, had become, through unknown circumstances, the property of a Christian family. One of its members was called Prisca (not the wife of Aquila nor the St.Prisca of our calendar, who was a girl of twelve. [34]) This Prisca may have

[31]) These parts will be published in the *Kölner Jahrbuch für Vor- und Frühgeschichte,* 1955.

[32]) C. C. VAN ESSEN: *Amphore d'apparat de l'époque des Antonins,* in *Het Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek (The Netherlands Year-book for History of Art),* 1954, pp. 191-198.

[33]) APULEIUS: *Metam.,* XI, 23.

[34]) About Aquila and Prisca see the following passages in the N.T.: 1 *Cor.* 16, 19; *Acts* 18, 2 and 3; 18, 19 and 24, 6; *Rom.* 16, 3/5; 2 *Tim.* 4, 19 (cf. PAULY-WIS-

Fig. 8: Small terracotta lamp with two bunches of grapes joined by a chain.

belonged to the family of the Acilii Glabriones, or of the Cornelii Pudentes, where this name occasionally occurs. She handed over this house, or part of it, to the Christian community, who turned it into a so-called Titulus, 25 of which subsist in Rome. [35]) We know nothing as yet about this particular Titulus, but hope for revelations from further explorations.

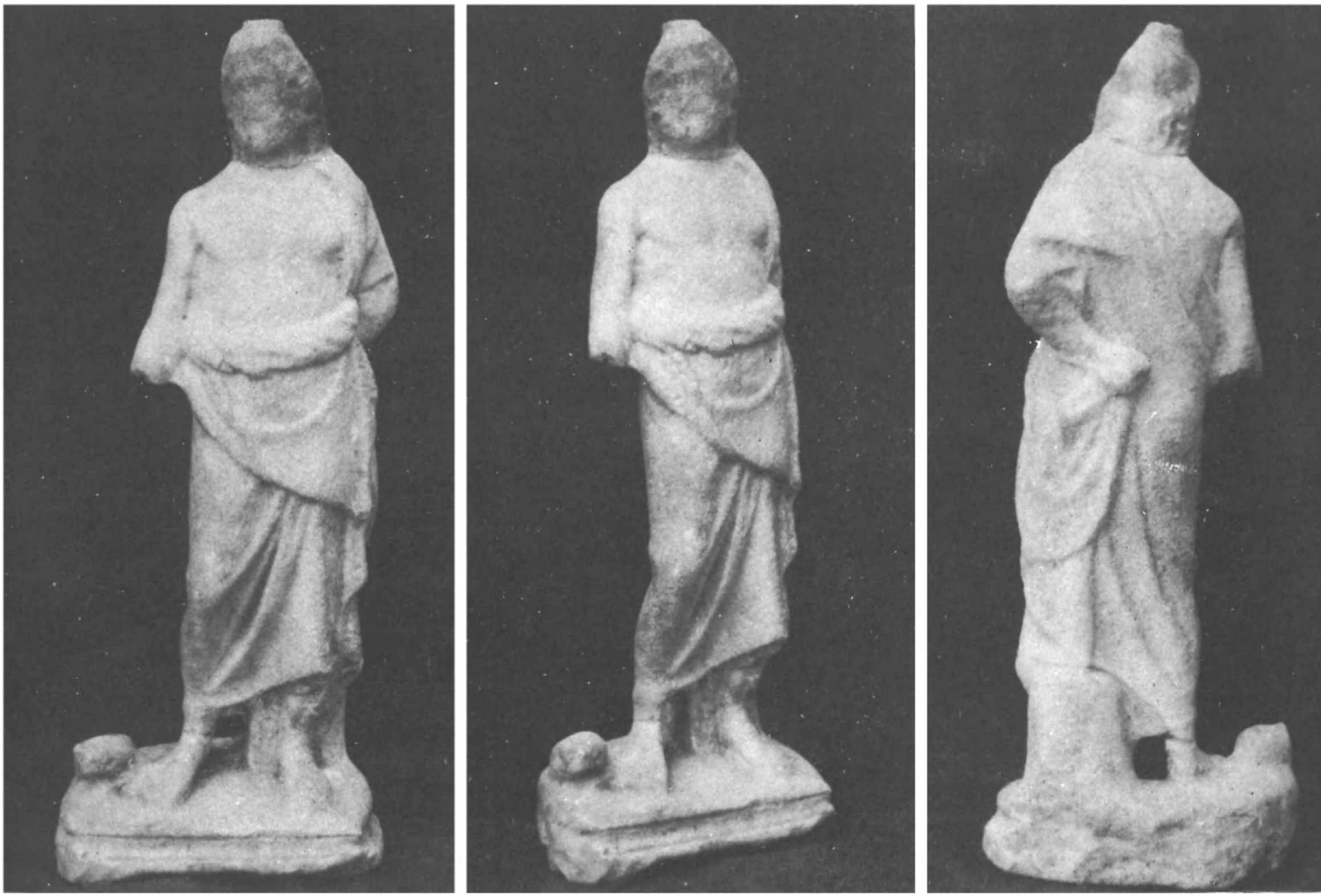
Thus on this spot a community of Mithras, and a community of Christ, the arch-enemies, lived side by side their separate existence.

This state of things endured through-out the fourth century. In 312 the so-called church-peace was proclaimed, based on the edict of Milan which vouchsaved religious freedom to all, but half a century later, following the pagan revival under Emperor Julian, led to reprisals on the part of the Christians. These were led up to by edicts of Emperor Theodosius I in 380, and of Gratianus in 382. [36]) This reaction was not particularly successful at first, as we happen to know from written testimonies. The temple of Hercules in Ostia, for instance, was restored as late as 392. But when in 395 Honorius came

SOWA, *Realenzyklop.*, s.v. *Prisca*, Nr. 2). *Rom.* 16 does not allow us to establish where Aquila and Prisca lived in Rome (A. MERLIN: *L'Aventin dans l'antiquité*, Paris 1906, pp. 386ff). The names Aquila and Prisca are fairly common (see PAULY-WISSOWA s.v. *Aquila*). For their connection with the Acilii Glabriones see CABROL-LECLERCQ: *Dictionn. Archéol. crétienne*, s.v. *Prisca* and *Priscilla;* O. MARUCCHI: *Le Catacombe romane*, Roma 1933, pp. 461ff; 499. There is also a Prisca (Priscilla) in the family of the Cornelii Pudentes. It is to be noted that one C. Marius Pudens Cornelianus possessed a house on the Clivus Publicius, exactly opposite the church of St.Prisca (CABROL-LECLERCQ, 1182-3). Another Prisca is a girl who died as a martyr under Emperor Claudius, whom in accordance with Leclercq we can suppose to be Claudius II Gothicus (368-370).

35) This word actually means nameplate on a house, which thus indicates the owner and property. (J. P. KIRSCH: *Die römischen Titelkirchen im Altertum*. Paderborn 1918). The oldest buildings where Christians used to meet were actually houses or churches disguised as houses. One of these has been preserved beside the church of San Martino ai Monti in Rome, the Titulus Equitii.

36) The edicts of the Emperors have been made out several times, which proves that their effect was slight in the beginning (CABROL-LECLERCQ, *op.cit.*, s.v. *paganisme*, pp. 254ff). Constantine the Great already started the demolition of pagan temples.
Constantius in 341 renewed a law of Constantine's against the pagan cult and tightened it up soon afterwards; in 353 he ordered the closure of the temples and continued this action in the following years. After the pagan reaction under Julian and the interval under Jovianus, new severe edicts were issued in 364/5 under Valentinianus. This was followed in 382(?) by the question of the removal from the Senate of the statue of Victoria, and at the same time he dispossessed the pagan temples. Theodosius completed the work with his edicts of 380, 389 and 392. But his successors still considered it necessary to confirm these edicts several times.



A B

Plate XII: Marble statuette of standing Serapis.
(photo P. Pestman).

Plate XIII: Small marble head of a boy.
(photo P. Pestman).

to power, the situation grew really serious. It is true that as late as 397, a member of the Symmachi family openly confessed to his belief in Mithras, but that was one last visible manifestation. Somewhere around 400 A.D., our Mithraeum must have shared the fate of so many of its predecessors. The Christians invaded it, hacked at the wall paintings with their axes, smashed everything to pieces, and made a pile of the fragments. Their vandalism was clearly illustrated by the excavation of the small room beside the large niche: a stucco head of Mithras lay face downwards in one of the corners. Bowls had been smashed, and other fragments of stucco hidden inside. A small marble image of a standing Serapis (plate XII, A, B) had been broken. A considerable number of small lamps, (fig. 8) and one beautifully worked larger, three-wick lamp had been heaped in the space between two walls elsewhere in the temple. (fig. 9) The words *"subvertit, fregit, excussit"*, used by St. Jerome to describe the wrecking of a Mithraeum by the town prefect Gracchus certainly seem to apply here.

This was the way in which the Christians celebrated the building of the great church (Basilica) which replaced the earlier Titulus somewhere around that time, as we can see from the few vestiges of the original building we are now acquainted with. Did it stand exactly above it? We don't know, as yet. But we do know that it lay on a higher level than the Mithraeum. An opening was made in the back wall of House I, and an apsis added, which now overlays the front part of the Mithraeum, thus clearly symbolizing the subjection of Mithras to Christ. In order to wipe out all memory of the Mithraeum — and this was most succesfully achieved — it was completely filled up with earth, rubble and potsherds even in the parts not underlying the church, so that there can be no question of an attempt to reinforce its foundations. Weeks of hard work must have been expended on this job. Holes were hewn in the floors of the pagan house, which

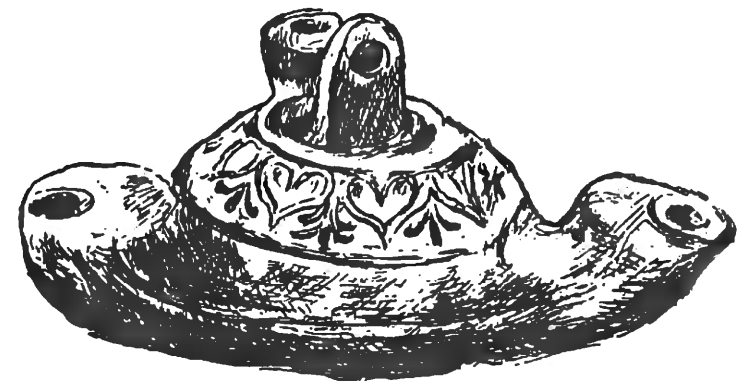


Fig. 9: Three-wick hanging lamp, probably used to light the sanctuary niche.

appears to have been also thoroughly wrecked. Everything they wanted to get rid of was thrown down into the underlying vaults, including Christian objects. Down below, a gang of workmen swept the refuse back into the corners. This appears clearly from the fact that the rubbish was not found lying in cone-shaped heaps, but spread fairly flat and rather higher in the corners. None of the objects found up to now are of a later date than 400 A.D. It is, of course, quite impossible to make out how many of these objects may have been part of the furnishings of House II.

In all documents anterior to 500 A.D., the new church is called simply Titulus Priscae. These earliest churches, where the first Christians suffered such vicissitudes, remained faithful to their glorious names even in their new guise. The name of Titulus Sanctae Priscae only appears at a later date, and later still, when its historic significance had been completely lost, a fusion was effected which melted Prisca, the wife of Aquila, Prisca, the owner of the house, and the virgin Sancta Prisca into one single person. Thus in Carlovingian times, about 900, a strange inscription (now lost, but preserved in a copy) was placed on the façade of a house. It began: *Haec domus est Aquilae seu Priscae virginis almae,* 'this is the house of Aquila, or of the virgin Prisca, the giver of blessings'.

At this time our church also acquired a crypt (now still existing in a modernized version) and a choir-

screen, small fragments of which have been preserved. When in 1086 Robert Guiscard conquered Rome, leaving the southern part of the city in ruins, our church was not left unharmed. About 1115, the apsis, at any rate, was renovated under Pope Paschalis II. But half a century later, as appears from an inscription in the church, Pope Calixtus III (1168—1178) carried out extensive building operations there (if the reports on them have not been exaggerated in the same measure as the traditions concerning Paschalis II). Then there is silence. But towards the end of the 16th century the building again seems to have been in a bad state of repair, and Cardinal Camillo Borghese tackled the problem very energetically. He had the middle part of the façade moved back, and a vault built over the shortened body of the church, which called for the reinforcement of the columns. The original columns are now enclosed in the present pillars. The walls, too, were strengthened to twice their original thickness, so that the Roman parts, if any, are not visible.

The nineteenth century indulged in the pleasure of decorating the interior with sentimental paintings, and in 1939/40, in pursuance of the first excavations, the section now called the sacristy was thoroughly dealt with. The earlier sections were uncovered and the wrecked masonry restored.

In 1934, the Augustine Fathers who had the custody of the church wished to obtain more storage space, and at the same time to make the attempt (doomed to failure, as it turned out) to find among the Roman remains underlying the church the house of Aquila and Prisca, which mediaeval legend had situated there. Working with limited means, they nevertheless discovered a Mithraeum which turned out to be the largest and most important of all those we are acquainted with so far. They uncovered the ante-room and the main room with the paintings, and these were published in 1940 by A. Ferrua S.J. These excavations attracted the attention of Franz Cumont, who made a fund available for further excavations. The war intervened, and made further research impossible. There were no funds for the up-keep of the buildings, and owing to the high grade of humidity, valuable objects were lost which might otherwise have been preserved. In 1952, we obtained from the Soprintendenza Roma I (which has since then assisted us with unflagging helpfulness in all our difficulties) permission to continue our explorations. [37]) In March 1953, we started on the actual excavation work, which was financed from private funds. In this same year we obtained the support of the *Nederlandse Organisatie voor Zuiver Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek.* At the present moment, the work is being sponsored by an active Committee.

In so far as the Mithraeum has been uncovered, it consists of an ante-room, a main room, and three lateral chapels. To the left of the niche is a small sacristy, where in August 1954 the beautiful stucco heads were found, and a marble boys head (plate XIII) of high artistic value. The work in the Mithraeum has not yet been completed. Both to the south and the north-west there are sections of it still waiting to be uncovered. Our program for this year consists in the removal of the sand behind the right-hand wall of the Mithraeum, so as to allow the paintings to dry, thus creating favourable conditions for the separation of the two layers of paintings. After that, we must extend our researches to the regions below and beside the church, in order to ascertain the outlines of the original Titulus. Like the earlier stages of our work, the job on this building will require a considerable amount of restoration.

[37]) We are very grateful to Prof. Dr. Pietro Romanelli and Dr. Maria Bianca Felletti-Maj.

ANTIQUITY AND SURVIVAL

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